

## [Review] Iga Maria Lehman (2018) Authorial presence in English academic texts: a comparative study of student writing across cultures and disciplines

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## Book Review

Iga Maria Lehman, *Authorial presence in English academic texts: A comparative study of student writing across cultures and disciplines*, Peter Lang, Berlin, Germany (2018). Pp. 251, \$56.95 (Paperback).

In my work as a teacher of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), I annually assess pre-sessional students' researched essays, applying marking criteria that include "development of appropriate author voice" (Pre-sessional Tutor Handbook, 2017). No definition of author voice is supplied and there is a dearth of information on voice in EAP reference books. For example, in both Hyland (2006) and Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008) the term *voice* is absent from the index. It is left to practitioners to operationalise the construct and arrive at a collective understanding. Iga Maria Lehman's book, the twelfth in the Peter Lang series Studies in Language, Culture and Society, seemingly fills this gap. It is aimed at applied linguists and English language teachers working at the tertiary level, and it tests the hypothesis that a writer's voice and academic writer identity are constructs of writing competence and the writer's self.

Lehman's purpose in the book is twofold: to fill a gap in the research pertaining to academic writers' construction of identity, and to demonstrate the application of original diagnostic tools designed to assess writers' development of second language author identity. Lehman describes herself on her website as a sociolinguist and a member of the faculty at the University of Social Sciences Warsaw, where she teaches intercultural communication. The book appears partly to be based on the author's dissertation (Lehman, 2014). The full title of Lehman's book might imply an ontological enquiry into how voice is understood and employed in a wide range of educational settings and subject specialisms. However, it is neither a qualitative study in the tradition of comparative literature nor a replication of the work of contrastive rhetoricians, but a broad survey of language, culture, identity and writing (Chapters 1-3) with a quantitative case study (Chapter 4) tagged on.

Lehman claims this to be the first study of second language (L2) authorial voice across '30 cultures' (p. 140), by which she appears to mean 38 nationalities (Appendix H: Raw data), and four academic disciplines, viz. Accounting, Management, English Studies, and Finance and Accounting. Presumably, the cultures and disciplines represent convenience samples as

Lehman does not justify her choices. The object of Lehman's enquiry is the nature of the identity negotiated by tertiary level L2 students through their academic writing. Specifically, Lehman is interested in "How people present themselves as authors and how their possibilities for self-expression are supported and/or limited by the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they write" (p. 13). Although she does not engage with them in her study, Lehman cites several academic literacies authors (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2003), and acknowledges their transformative approach to academic writing (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Tuck, 2016). And whilst Lehman does not formally define voice, her models of authorial self-representation and academic writer's voice (pp. 52 and 143 respectively) follow Ivanič (1998), Matsuda (2001) and Prior (2001) in combining the self-expressive (*ethos*) and social constructionist (*persona*) traditions and seeing them as mutually constitutive but separate.

In Lehman's model of academic writer's voice, *ethos* represents 'voice as content' (familiar to EAP practitioners as hedging devices and adverbial metacomments such as sentence introducers or attitude markers such as 'Perhaps', 'Undoubtedly') whilst *persona* represents 'voice as form' (familiar to EAP practitioners as signposting and signalling and other examples of adverbial conjuncts such as 'To conclude', 'See Figure'). The two voices express what Lehman terms the 'individual' and 'collective' selves respectively; likewise, together, or separately, they constitute the 'depersonalised self' and the 'text' (p. 137). All three selves: individual, collective and depersonalised, produce authorial presence in the text. One purpose of Lehman's case study is to illustrate the application of her selection of writer's metadiscourse as an essay for author voice (p. 137). In practice, this means Lehman's tripartite model of academic writer's voice (p. 143) is applied in her study by 30 raters to an opinion essay written by 310 student respondents. The scripts are marked on a five-level scale for rhetorical structure, focus and development, and language use (Appendix B); and for dominant voice using indicative discourse resources such as pronouns and the passive for independent, collective, and depersonalised voice (Appendix C). The student writers' voices were found to be overwhelmingly depersonalised.

Lehman's opening anecdote (p. 13) on British-Pakistani novelist and playwright Hanif Kureishi, and her references to the alienation of second language learners – later twinned with the working class and referred to as "non-participants in the dominant Anglo-American discourse community" (p. 125) – is intended to convey the alienation felt by the second

language migrant writer. She maintains that L2 identity is insufficiently allowed to flourish in the context of institutional demands on the student writer. Lehman's research question, which is first set out in the fourth chapter when she begins a review of her own research, is: "How does authorial voice correlate with gender, linguistic competence, writing competence, cultural background and academic discipline?" (p. 129). The list of variables appears to require a correlational analysis, although in the event the variables are tested in pairs - such as gender and writing competence - using the Chi-square test. Lehman's student sample comes from three universities in Warsaw, Poland and one in Salamanca, Spain, and includes a number of trans-national students. As well as native Poles and a mixed body of international students, there is a discrete but sizeable group of Ukrainian students, providing three contrasting cohorts: Polish, Ukrainian and Other.

The relationship of language, culture and identity is explored through text, genre and discourse in Chapter 1. Lehman refutes the linguistic determinism of the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, claiming that a dichotomy exists between agency and structure and asserting that the "writing conventions of a particular discourse community are challenged by the agentive power of the author" (p. 56). Writers are capable of showing agency in subverting a discourse community's writing conventions because the constituents (*ethos* and *persona*) of the writer's self are dynamic and "discoursally constructed" aspects of author identity (p. 56). Lehman ends the chapter with further quotations from bilingual author autobiographies, this time from the work of Eva Hoffman and Anna Wirzbicka, to illustrate the ongoing provisional and discursive project of constructing a linguistic identity. Both Hoffman and Wirzbicka are well known for having crossed linguistic and cultural borders, and Lehman claims that L2 writing offers particular opportunities for a writer to reconstruct the past in the process of moving forward, so that the act of writing itself becomes therapeutic.

Lehman's purpose in the short second chapter is to demonstrate the way in which the social context constitutes language, thought and identity and how the orality or literacy of a culture results in different patterns of writing. The remainder of the chapter explores metadiscourse, an essential undertaking for Lehman's subsequent enquiry. She presents a table from Hyland (2005) that categorises metadiscourse as interactive and interactional and provides functions and linguistic examples for each category. Many of the examples within the interactive and interactional categories, such as transitions (interactive) and hedges (interactional), will be familiar to EAP teachers and are subsequently included in Lehman's voice rubric (Appendix

C) as exemplars to identify and categorise the three voice forms for the data analysis. All offer the writer the possibility of constructing a unique voice at the same time as adhering to the countervailing conventions demanded by the academic writing community.

The English academic essay, with its imposed writing conventions (for example, the stereotypical five-paragraph essay), and the rise in popularity of a genre approach in the teaching of academic writing are the central concerns of the next chapter (Chapter 3). In an account of the academic writing teaching tradition in North America, a clear distinction is made between the acceptable expository, descriptive and argumentative essay genres and a fourth: personal narrative. According to Lehman, personal narrative is usually shunned by the traditional pedagogic establishment, although it has become increasingly popular in the social sciences as an indirect means to develop critical thinking. This radical approach offers writers the opportunity to express multiple voices and is structurally unstable, perhaps reasons why it is treated with such suspicion by traditionalists.

Lehman's general hypothesis is that writer's voice is defined by writing proficiency and the interplay of the individual, collective and depersonalised aspects of the writer's expression. In this way, the identity of a writer is malleable. The final chapter (Chapter 4) follows the conventional structure of a research report, with a brief introduction stating the aim of the enquiry, viz. to investigate the correlation between writing proficiency and authorial voice. The chapter comprises theoretical and methodological frameworks, the general hypothesis outlined above, and the forms of data, which consist of participant responses to pre-writing questionnaires, biographical interviews, and an in-class writing prompt. The remaining sections in the chapter describe the instruments used to assess writing proficiency and voice; the data collection procedures, including rater training; data analysis comprising 13 detailed quantitative hypotheses and findings, and qualitative analyses and findings; and conclusion. Lehman found a marked preference for the depersonalised voice in the writing of students from all three groups at all levels of linguistic competence, arguing that authorial self-representation is markedly constrained by dominant western discourse, transference of L1 rhetorical norms, and institutional positioning, and that L2 writers are marginalised and disempowered.

Two shortcomings of Lehman's book are closely related: the first three chapters are a readable but opaque cornucopia of theory; and the extensive original study lacks

circumstantial detail and a discussion section. The selection of analytical discursive criteria could also have been better justified, and there is no discussion of possible alternatives to the formal features in Hyland (2005), such as the use of modal verbs to express authority (deonticity) or other content-related features (cf. Stock & Eik-Nes, 2016). In my own essay marking, I grade author voice on the evidence of reporting verbs, signalling – including the content of the introduction and conclusion – and evaluative paragraph concluding sentences. Lehman herself implies a neglect of alternative possibilities by her suggestion that future research investigate the discursive resources that academic writers use to signal their voice (p. 189). Readers might also wonder about the difference between some of Lehman's discursive descriptors, for example, the use of all three conditional forms as indicative of the individual self voice, and modal verbs as indicative of the depersonalised self voice. When the two are part of the same construction, for example, "*If you studied harder, you would get better grades*" (Appendix C: Voice rubric, italics in original), which voice should they be assigned to? Rating the writing competence for each script on a 1-5 scale is relatively straightforward, as Lehman suggests, as there are only 3 categories (Rhetorical structure; Focus and development; Language use) (Appendix B: Guide for primary and multiple trait scoring), but rating the dominant voice is much more complex as there is seldom any one to one correspondence between the descriptors of the three sub-types. Furthermore, no inter-rater reliability coefficient or other information is given on the 30 people tasked with marking the 310 scripts, whose duties appear to have been (1) to rate writing competence on a five-level scale according to rhetorical structure, focus and development, and language use (Appendix B); and (2) to rate dominant voice using the voice rubric that includes the indicative discourse resources referred to earlier for independent, collective, and depersonalised voices (Appendix C).

Lehman's findings are meticulously presented, and the dependencies between voice and writing competence, which is also self-assessed by her participants in questionnaires (Appendix F) according to the levels in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>), and between voice and academic discipline, are consistent with the literature (cf. Hyland, 2004). The findings are thus useful in confirming the existence of substantive differences in students' writing at cultural and social levels, and in relation to voice in particular. A number of the quantitative findings are potentially exciting and deserve further discussion. For example, the following three findings (all p. 186) have implications

for second language acquisition and L2 pedagogy: ‘(g) the largest differences in the use of all three voice types are observed at linguistic competence level C1’. Is this because level C1 contains a wide range of learner types and language development, or because the learner has recently acquired the repertory of discursive resources and is still experimenting with their production?; ‘(h) at linguistic competence level C2 students predominantly use [a depersonalised] voice ...; however, in doing so, they use significantly fewer discursive resources than students from linguistic competence levels C1 and B2’. How have these C2 students learned first to select a depersonalised voice and then to optimise their depersonalised voice resources?; ‘(i) the largest differences in the use of all the three voice types are a level 4 of writing competence’, i.e., very good production of organisation, argument and language, such as that characterised by ‘very few errors’ in language use. Is this because students at level 4 are still experimenting with a repertory of resources on their way to achieving a higher stage of fluency? As Lehman points out, tertiary level English language practitioners work in a globalised environment. What are the implications of the findings for administrative and faculty professionals and educational strategists? Further reflection on these results would have been welcome.

The significance of this volume lies in its consolidation of post-structuralist theory on second language writers’ voice and the results obtained from the study. Lehman herself suggests a number of areas for further research, including the extent to which academic writers’ voice is influenced by intentionality; the influence on academic discourse of relations of power; the extent to which academic writers ‘appropriate, resist and negotiate’ the linguistic resources of the institution’ (p. 189); and the motivation for authors’ establishment or concealment of author voice in their writing and the sort of discursive resources they draw on to achieve this. The study’s findings also point to more targeted work on gender and voice and on the relations between the discursive resources associated with the voices of the collective and depersonalised self. In this regard, further research might investigate C1-level writers’ wide variation in the use of the three voices; the basis on which C2-level writers operate the smaller number of discursive resources in their depersonalised voice; and the reasons level 4 writers produce such a wide variation in their use of the three voices.

Lehman’s major contribution is the large-scale application of her model (p. 143) to diagnose academic writer’s voice. Evolutionary rather than radical, the model clearly occupies a place in the ongoing research on voice and provides a useful reference for EAP teachers and

students. It is a reminder that in the L2 writer's quest for socialisation into academic discourse, there is room to find and develop a personal voice. As Cameron (2012, p. 256) writes, "It is idle to suppose that any academic writer can ignore or transcend externally imposed constraints and expectations, but there is still space for writers to negotiate their own position, and to be shapers as well as reproducers of the discourse they inherit." For all these reasons, Lehman's book is timely and fills a gap, and it will be a welcome complement to the small body of literature in the area of authorial self-representation in academic texts. For any scholar seeking to better understand the provenance and development of L2 writers' authorial voice, the book is necessary reading.

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